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ABSTRACT

The investigation of peer response groups in a basic college writing class was one method of charting the development of students' writing skills over the span of a semester to see if collaborative learning was beneficial to the writing process. Response groups were tape-recorded and observed, and members were interviewed. By the fourth week of the semester it was clear that the students had begun to develop an awareness of the need to examine their compositions for considerations other than mere surface errors. They had begun to "re-see" their drafts as a result of comments made in response groups. As time went on, the participants interrupted themselves more frequently and seemed to be mentally planning revisions as they made self-directed comments about their papers--a skill often lacking in inexperienced writers. These basic writers began to develop the fluency needed to write "passionately," after practicing their critical skills on others. In the collaborative learning situation of the response group they had begun to do more of the kinds of things seasoned writers do--experiencing dissonance, doing more self-monitoring, and beginning to write and read critically. (Transparencies used in the presentation are included, and figures and references are appended.) (NKA)

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Response Groups as a Source of Data for Classroom Based Research

Eve Coleman

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PANEL DISCUSSION
RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING (A-15)
NCTE'S CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION
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"Response Groups as A Source of Data for Classroom Based Research"

Abstract

Teacher-researchers at all levels of instruction continually wrestle with the problem of documenting growth in student writing during short-term studies. This session described how the presenter, working as a teacher-researcher in a Basic Writing class, used peer response groups to document indicators of growth in student writing.

The research reported here is part of the presenter's dissertation entitled, "An Ethnographic Description of Basic Writers' Revision Skills," which was completed at the University of South Carolina in 1985 and is available through University Microfilms International.

Introduction

Many of us can remember a day when the term, "collaboration," had negative connotations--collaborator--the old stool pigeons of classic gangster movies; "collaboration"--a classroom euphemism for downright cheating. Yet here we all are today--in an academic session-- collaborating on our collaboration experiences. I suppose the psychologists who are coining so many of the terms we use in composition these days might call the session META-COLLABORATION--collaborating about collaboration. While we may have just coined a new phrase to talk about collaboration, the idea of collaborative learning is certainly not new.

Background

I've been asking my students to collaborate on learning tasks ever since I was a student-teacher in a high school in 1968. Even

then, the literature suggested that collaborative learning was important. Then, in 1972, I read a book that set my composition teaching on a different track, one I'm still following to this day. The book was Ken Macrorie's Writing to be Read. Since then, I've used what we now call reader-response groups or peer groups. But, I'll admit, right here in the "Meta-Collaboration" session, that I've experienced my share of setbacks with students working in groups!

How often have I sat and watched or walked around and observed students working in groups and wondered:

WHY IN THE WORLD AM I DOING THIS?

WHAT CAN THEY POSSIBLY BE DOING IN THOSE GROUPS THAT WILL CAUSE THEM TO BE BETTER WRITERS?

But I kept "doing" groups--it was what those who were supposed to know more than I did recommended. But always in the back of my mind were these nagging questions:

IS THE TIME WE SPEND ON THIS WORTH IT?

WHAT HAPPENS IN RESPONSE GROUPS?

Teacher-as-Researcher

And then I discovered a way to investigate my own classroom questions. I discovered by reading books and articles and by hearing people like Dixie Goswami and Marion Mohr talk about ways teachers could seek answers to their nagging classroom questions; I discovered the TEACHER-AS-RESEARCHER movement. And I became a teacher researcher--an investigator of my own students and my own teaching.

One of the questions that had been on my mind for a long time concerned student response groups.

So I set out to investigate the response groups in my own classroom, with my own students who were what we've come to call Basic College Writers. They were underprepared college students, taking my course to prepare themselves for the mainstream freshman English course. The investigation was framed by the metaphor of basic writers wandering through a house of mirrors. It wasn't that all the steps of the writing process weren't there in their writing, but rather that the steps were distorted. They could get neither a clear picture of where they were going, nor how they got to where they were. The response group data was only one of several sources I hoped to collect in order to describe the development of these basic students' writing skills over the span of one semester. What I had intended to do was to study drafts of papers of five participants, listen to their response groups, and try to determine which changes from draft to draft were made as a result of something that happened in response groups. That is not what I ended up doing!

Discovery and Recursion

The process of ethnographic research parallels the process of writing in many ways. Part of the research process itself involves discovery. Another parallel is the recursive nature of both processes. I knew I wanted to tape record the response groups, but I had my doubts about the success of what I was planning to do with them. I had to listen and think and, in recursive terms, "go backward in order to go forward."

I did have the good sense--maybe the sense of self-preservation--to limit the amount of tapes I would have to deal with. I had five participants in the study, and I put all of

those in one group. I taped and transcribed the first two sessions and observed and took notes on two more sessions. I also used interview sessions to talk to the participants individually about what had gone on in response group.

Back to discovery and recursion. After I had taped and transcribed the first two sessions, I had the sickest feeling! I had no idea what I would do with all this data. One of my lowest points came halfway through transcribing the very first tape. I made the following entry into my field notes:

I have analyzed only one-half of one response group's tape, and already reactions and questions are beginning to occur to me.

Reactions -

1. I had no idea how time-consuming the process of analysis of tapes could be. I now realize that I will not be able to verify changes for every participant's paper for every response group. I need to try to think of an alternate way to use the response groups as evidence of growth.

2. I had no idea how much I could learn about what goes on in response group. The transcript in itself could be a terrific teaching tool...

Shortly after this entry was made, an idea struck me--it was the proverbial lightbulb or "aha!" While transcribing the first response group session I realized that students were talking about important issues in writing; they were using vocabulary they had never used before--"elaborate; show, don't tell; describe."

(transparency 1)

Faigley/Witte Revision Taxonomy

I was already using the Faigley/Witte revision taxonomy (1981) to analyze student texts. I thought, "WHY NOT USE THE SAME TAXONOMY TO ANALYZE THE TRANSCRIPTS FOR TYPES OF SUGGESTIONS AND COMMENTS THE PARTICIPANTS WERE MAKING IN RESPONSE GROUPS!"

And so, the data itself had led me to discover the key to unlocking the mystery of how to use the data.

A few words about the taxonomy: the major divisions in the taxonomy are between SURFACE CHANGES AND MEANING CHANGES. The breakdowns within the major categories are these-
(transparency 2)

If you are not familiar with the taxonomy it is fully explained in the reference (bottom of transparency).

The analysis by taxonomy revealed that after less than a month of instruction, students were developing an awareness of the need for meaning-advancing, as well as for surface-level changes in the papers they were hearing.

These are some of the meaning-advancing suggestions the students were making during the first session:

(transparency 1)

And this is how these comments broke down on the revision taxonomy:

(transparency 2)

Now, contrast the number of comments the students made in the meaning-advancing category to the kinds of changes they were making from draft to draft of the first paper.

(transparency 3)

No real signs that anything much is happening here, but as

experienced teachers, we often have intuitive feelings about our students' progress that simply isn't verified in their papers. If we looked only at written texts, we would rate these students as having made little progress.

Dissonance

As I sifted through the data I was collecting, I began to see what was happening in response group as the development of the "dissonance" which Nancy Sommers describes as being present with experienced writers and missing in inexperienced writers. Sommers says:

It is a sense of writing as discovery--a repeated process of beginning over again, starting out new--that these students failed to have...Good writing disturbs: it creates dissonance. Students need to seek the dissonance of discovery, utilizing in their very writing, as the experienced writers do, the very difference between writing and speech--the possibility of revision (p. 387).

By the fourth week of the semester, these students had begun to develop an awareness of the need to examine their drafts for considerations other than mere surface errors. Students had begun to "re-see" their drafts, often as a result of comments made in response groups. They had begun to recognize the need for changes, but often did not know how to translate their awareness of the need onto the written page (hence, when we see the analysis of the first paper, it looks like no growth has occurred, when I, as the teacher, intuitively knew it had!

This exchange took place during the second round of interviews, after the completion of Paper 2. "T" is teacher and "K" is Kay, one

of the participants:

T. Which paper did you like best in response group?

K. Gerald's. I could have cried at the end. I was moved.

T. How does that make you feel about what you want to do with your own paper?

K. Makes me want to put some feeling in. I know how it is, but I don't know how to do it.

Kay's last statement, "I know how it is, but I don't know how to do it," reveals something important about the collaborative learning that had been taking place in the response groups. Kay had been "rehearsing," in response groups with others' papers, the kinds of responses experienced writers make about their own writing during the revision process.

Self-Monitoring

During the first response group, the "authors" had little control over the discussion about their papers. They listened as others critiqued their work. The only instance of self-monitoring during the first session occurred when Kay interrupted herself to comment that she was "describing too much in one area."

However, during the second response group session, the participants interrupted themselves more frequently and seemed to be mentally planning revisions as they made self-directed comments about their papers, a skill that is often lacking in inexperienced writers, but present in the writing processes of experienced writers (Flower, 1979). Examples follow:

Kay

K. I don't know if I should say this. (She continues

reading her paper) That doesn't make sense.

G. (Reading his paper) She never fussed at me when I would do something dishonest. (He stops himself and reflects) I need to give an example there.

John

J. (Stops reading his paper and laughs) I left something out! (He tells the group a part of the story, which he later incorporates into the next draft).

By the final response group, the participants were taking charge of the discussion about their own papers. They performed in a task-oriented, business-like manner, with little of the hesitancy and playfulness evident in the first two response group sessions. The students were still reading their papers aloud, but were actually making more comments about their own papers than the group members did.

Developing Revision Skill

I've heard Lucy Calkins say that writers must be "passion hot and critic cold." These basic writers were developing the fluency needed to write "passionately," but in the beginning it was too difficult for them to practice being critical of their own papers (even though that is what I urged them to do). Yet, they rehearsed the critic cold stage on others until, without even realizing it, they were doing similar critiques of their own papers. By the last interview session, the participants could verbalize what they had gained from response groups that they were taking away. I want to end this talk with excerpts from the final interview sessions.

Final Interview Sessions

The final interview sessions were ripe with participant

comments about increased self-monitoring practices. I believe John and Kay's interviews are typical of what the five participants felt they had gained from their collaborative learning experiences.

John

T. Do you try to become somebody else when you're reading?

J. I become an authority on the subject. Every time when I write it, I'm the student writing it. And when I read it, I'm kinda' like--what--a teacher? You know. You try to divorce yourself from yourself a little bit and as a teacher I see what the student is doing wrong.

T. We haven't used the response group lately. Do you feel like you can do without it now?

J. Yeah, I'm my own response group now. After the first couple of times I see how I could have helped myself by being the judge of my own paper and I put myself in other peoples' place to see how they would feel about the paper. So I know what they want to tell me, so I go from there.

T. So there's something there inside now saying the things you've heard others say, whether it was the teacher or people in your response group. Are you beginning to say things you think they would say?

J. Yeah, I'm just picturing what they might tell me. Like I hear Gerald's voice...I should because my first paper when they jumped all over me--I'll never forget that. I picture Gerald being right here (pointing) and Salli on the other side of me and just hearing both of them coming

at me telling me what I needed to do.

T. More than the teacher?

J. Yeah, so I do know what I'm doing wrong.

T. Do you think it would have been as effective if the teacher had talked to you about those changes?

J. I don't think so because from the students' point of view, we can relate better to one another, but the teacher has been around more and might (as well) be talking French to me.

The "voice inside the head" that John heard became the basis for probing the other participants about their "voices."

Kay

T. John said something interesting yesterday when we talked. He said, "when I read my own papers, now, I hear Gerald's voice."

K. Oh yeah...Yeah, I've had the same thing, but when I read over mine, there's someone, but it's more like you. I put myself in your place and read over it and then the paper's talking back.

"The paper was talking back" to Kay. For these students, being in a response group--a collaborative learning situation--had served its purpose. They had moved farther away from being inexperienced writers and were doing more of the kinds of things that experienced writers do--experiencing dissonance, doing more self-monitoring, and beginning to write passionately and read critically. In Kay's words, now when they read their own papers, the papers talked back.

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Transparency 1

PEER RESPONSES

Session one

- he should elaborate more about the store
- he has to have some main area to focus on
- maybe it's too broad
- show more
- he talked too much about certain things
- yeah, you have to describe some more here
- how do you think you could elaborate more on it?
- talk more about the atmosphere
- you've got to say specifically how the store was decorated nicely
- describe the owner
- describe his personality
- not enough details
- not enough information
- didn't capture all the details of the place
- has to put her thoughts into

clearer view

*-I'm describing too much. I've
got to describe more on one area

-do you think she told more than
showed about the details?

-I think you need to show more of
the place rather than tell

-she could show more

* Only example of self-directed
comment during Session One

Transparency 2

Response Group One
Analysis by Faigley/Witte Taxonomy
Suggestions for Revision
(See Appendix E for Numerical Breakdown)

I. Surface											
A. Formal		B. Meaning Preserving									
1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
1				2	2	1	1	6			
II. Meaning Changes											
A. Formal		B. Macro									
1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
11	1	1				2	1	1			3

Figure 2

Faigley, L., and Witte, S. (1981). Analyzing revision.
College Composition and Communication, 32, 400-414.

Transparency 3

Paper One
Analysis by Falgley/Witte Taxonomy
(See Appendix E for Numerical Breakdown)

I. Surface Changes													
A. Formal						B. Meaning Preserving							
1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6		
			2			2							
			1	1				7					
1		1	10				5	2					
3	1		5			4	1	4					
II. Meaning Changes													
A. Micro						B. Macro							
1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6		
1													
4													
4													

Figure 1